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## PRO-FILES

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# The Next Step

A fallen NBA lottery pick is cashing in on a new fitness training tool

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE



him to a four-year, \$28 million contract in October 2002, it was more evidence of the Pacers' grand vision for Bender—even if it overlooked his critical shortcoming: He had chronically brittle knees. Before the 2003–04 season Bender had arthroscopic surgery on his left knee to repair deteriorating cartilage, but the procedure didn't effectively solve the problem. He played just 30 games for Indiana after that.

As his time in Indiana came to an end, **Bender knew he had to start thinking about life after the NBA.** He wanted to be like Pacers owner Mel Simon, a self-made strip mall magnate. Bender's fascination with his boss ran so deep that he often drove over to Simon's house without getting out of his car, as if the secret to Simon's success was sitting at his front gate.

Bender—who grew up in Picayune, where his mom was a Walmart cashier and his dad was a cook—was earnest in his curiosity. “I came from a very small town,” he says. “I didn't know any big-business people or people who really owned anything. All I saw were people who worked. Everybody in my family had jobs.”

After reaching the NBA, Bender became the chief revenue source for at least 10 family members. When his knees forced him into retirement at age 25, he felt pressure to find an income stream that would allow him to continue to provide for so many people. He promoted concerts, started a record label, bought real estate—“tried everything big,” he says. Few of his investments panned out, leading to losses that severely cut into the \$30 million he earned over

**FIFTEEN YEARS AGO**

Jonathan Bender was basketball's hottest prospect, a 6' 11", 202-pound action figure with an explosive perimeter game—Kevin Durant before anyone knew who Kevin Durant was—that captivated NBA GMs.

Such lofty expectations weren't unfounded. Bender scored 31 points in the 1999 McDonald's All-American game, eclipsing by one point the record set in '81 by a kid named Michael Jordan. Rather than risk a drop in his NBA stock by enrolling at Mississippi State—where he signed coming out of Picayune (Miss.) Memorial High—Bender declared for the 1999 NBA draft. He was selected by the Raptors with

the fifth pick, but Pacers GM Donnie Walsh was so desperate to have Bender that he shipped future All-Star center Antonio Davis to Toronto to get him. The plan was for the 18-year-old small forward to succeed Reggie Miller as Indiana's superstar-in-residence.

In the Pacers' season opener, against the Cavaliers, Bender scored 10 points—at the time a high-water mark for a preps-to-pros player in his NBA debut. But after that statement game he went quiet, reaching double figures just once more that season.

Still, Bender kept at it. By his third season he had emerged as a solid rotation player, averaging 7.4 points in 21.1 minutes. When Walsh re-signed

**BEND, DON'T BREAK**

Bender's device is designed to help people with the kind of knee problems that derailed his NBA career.



his seven seasons with Indiana.

Bender was on the verge of becoming just one more millionaire athlete who squandered a fortune. But one afternoon in 2009, while people-watching at a public park in Houston, he hit on what would become a million-dollar idea: a training and rehab device that would improve the way people walked. “In about five minutes I had the whole thing put together, with duct tape and some cables and ankle weights from the corner pharmacy,” he says. “I tried the device on, and it worked exactly like I imagined. That’s when I told myself: If I can create a product that helps me, I know it’ll help everyone else.”

Bender didn’t know anything about building medical devices, but his years dealing with his bum knees made him think there must be a better way to avoid injuries. Bender’s initial design, the prototype of which only required enough of a budget to cover materials from the local fabric store and the work of a professional seamstress, was designed to alleviate stress on the joints by strengthening the muscle

groups around it. When completed it looked like a weightlifting belt with a pair of rear-facing resistance bands dangling from the bottom. Bender spent two years testing it by having his friends use it while they worked out before taking it to research physicians at Purdue University. The researchers found that **the product did indeed offer lower-joint relief while easing pressure on the knees and building strength in the quads, hamstrings and calves.**

Bender knew he had one more test to administer before putting his invention—he called it the JB Intensive Trainer—in stores. And only he could be the subject.

Bender worked out with his invention extensively for a full year. By December 2009 he felt so confident in the health of his knees that, at age 28, he decided to give the NBA another shot. He had remained in contact with Walsh, who by then was GM of the Knicks and gave Bender a tryout. Walsh was so impressed with what he saw that he signed Bender to a contract midway through

## The Bender File

5th

Pick in the 1999 NBA draft, by Indiana

5.5

NBA career scoring average

25

Age that knee problems first forced him to retire

40%

Monthly revenue growth since launching the JBIT MedPro

the 2009–10 season. Bender’s numbers on the court were solid—in 25 games he averaged 4.7 points in 11.7 minutes—but his stats in the training room blew away the Knicks’ doctors. After putting Bender through a battery of strength tests, they found that he had the most lower-body power of any player on the team.

Walsh offered him a chance to return the following season, but Bender turned it down: “Even though I knew the money would be good, it just felt like I’d be going backwards.” He thought his time would be better invested in refining the design of the JBIT, finding an overseas manufacturer and researching distribution channels. In July 2013 his creation—renamed the JBIT MedPro—hit the market.

Bender, the product’s only investor, set a goal of bringing in \$500,000 in revenue in the device’s first year and quickly exceeded it. Partnerships with brick-and-mortar stores like Relax The Back, which specializes in back-support products, and an affiliate network of people and online businesses helped propel revenue growth of 40% month over month since December. Bender, now 33, runs the whole operation from his laptop, with order fulfillment and customer service handled by third parties.

Most of Bender’s customers are baby boomers, but he expects that will change if a second device he is kicking around—which would do the same thing but be targeted for serious athletes—becomes available.

Bender never did reach the hype that accompanied him to the NBA. But his greatest success may be from helping others reach their goals. □